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## Tone of Obama's State of the Union speech matters as much as content, experts say

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The tone that President Barack Obama strikes during his State of the Union speech Tuesday will be just as important as what he says, New Jersey political experts say.

With memories of the Jan. 8 Arizona shootings still fresh, Obama can't afford to sound too combative or partisan during the speech, according to Fairleigh Dickinson University pollster Peter Woolley.

"He's not going to be able to give any address that has any sharp edges," Woolley said. "If he says there needs to be a new tone of civility, he's going to have to demonstrate that tone."

Six people died and Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., was critically wounded in the Tucson shootings. Giffords' intern, who came to her aid immediately after she was shot, will be in the audience during Obama's speech, along with some members of Giffords' medical team. Her husband, NASA astronaut Mark Kelly, declined an invitation to the speech so he could remain with Giffords, who's undergoing therapy in Houston.

Obama didn't mention Giffords or the shootings when he released a short video over the weekend previewing his speech. He did say his address will focus on the economy.

Unemployment has long stayed above 9 percent. In December, it was 9.4 percent nationally and 9.1 percent in New Jersey.

Businesses and jobless state residents and will be looking for Obama to provide encouragement and hope that the sluggish economic recovery will pick up pace, according to Katie DeVito, founder of NJUnemployed.com, a website that helps people find work.

Whenever the site hosts workshops or informal meetings, "somebody comes up to me and says, 'I just found a job,'" DeVito said. "They are finding the right jobs. And I think it's going to get better."

But job growth has slowed across the Garden State.

According to the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development, the state lost nearly 31,000 jobs between December 2009 and December 2010 — almost all of it in the public sector. Private companies shed 1,600 jobs in that period, compared to 121,100 from December 2008 to December 2009, the agency said.

Obama's speech should signal that the White House will be more receptive to Republican ideas to improve the economy, said Rep. Leonard Lance, R-Clinton Township. Republicans made huge gains during the Nov. 2 elections, taking control of the House and cutting deeply into the Democratic majority in the Senate.

During the lame-duck congressional session that followed, Obama and GOP leaders worked out a

deal to preserve Bush-era tax cuts for two years. Obama's decision to appoint former Wall Street banker William Daley as his new chief of staff is another encouraging sign, Lance said.

"I hope that the president, in his State of the Union address, will move more toward the center," said Lance, who voted for the tax-cut package. "Given the fact that the Republicans control the House now, I hope we can be involved in the process in a way we were not when we were the minority party."

Even strong Obama supporters such as Princeton resident Roy Winnick want the president to explain how he'll work in a bipartisan way. Winnick, who made thousands of phone calls on Obama's behalf during the 2008 presidential campaign, will be in the House chamber watching the speech live as a guest of Rep. Rush Holt, D-Hopewell Township. Like other liberals, Winnick had hoped Congress would adopt a government-run health insurance plan and opposed tax cuts for the wealthy. But he said he understands Obama has to compromise in order to govern.

"One has to be pragmatic," Winnick said. "It's quite common for mid-term elections to lean toward the party out of power. But I think President Obama has achieved a tremendous amount since taking office. I'd like him to say what he hopes to accomplish over the next two years and how he will accomplish it. I expect him to say that he will work hard to achieve consensus with all members of Congress."

New Jerseyans will be watching for signs the president understands what they're going through and is keeping economic concerns at the top of his agenda, Woolley said. And it's not just the unemployed who seek reassurance.

"Wall Street wants reassurances that he is not going to interfere unduly with the markets," Woolley said. "Fiscal conservatives will be looking for the president to be reassuring about getting the federal budget under control. People worried about their own jobs will be looking to be reassured that government will continue to try to stimulate the economy."

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